



USSR INTERESTS IN AFGHANISTAN: UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND OF SOVIET-AFGHAN WAR OF 1979

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ABSTRACT

The rivalry between USA and USSR, the ideological conflict of the communist and the capitalist, is considered as the highlight of the Cold war period. However, even before the rise of Capitalist USA against the Communist USSR, there was Imperialist Britain who stood against the expansionism of communist Russia, particularly in Central Asia. This was followed by the fall of Monarchy in Afghanistan and its invasion by USSR in 1978. This period of disturbance in Afghanistan can be held equally important to the era of Cold War. However, like any major conflict and war that takes place in this world has reasons behind it, this invasion was also not at all out of blue but was rather preceded by a chain of events. This paper is focused to understand the background and particularly those events that led to the decade long conflict in the region.

KEYWORDS: Soviet Union, USSR, Afghanistan, Communism, Socialist, Central Asia, Soviet-Afghan War, World Politics, British Imperialism, Western ideology, Capitalism

INTRODUCTION

“The Great Game”: Beginning to everything

“The great game” was referred to the 19th and 20th century rivalry between the British Empire and the Tsarist Russian Empire and the later USSR. The rivalry was over the control of the Central Asia particularly Afghanistan. The term “Great Game” was coined by Rudyard Kipling and was frequently used in his book “Kim”, referring to the British-Russian tensions in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan held geo-political importance between the two powers. In the 19th century, when Undivided India was under British rule, the empire was afraid that communist dominance in Afghanistan could open the doors of Soviet invasion on undivided India. In order to prevent this, the British forces fought three Anglo-Afghan wars in the region and had acquired control over some regions.

With the independence of Afghanistan after the third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919 and freedom to make its own foreign policies, USSR was the first to establish diplomatic ties with Afghanistan and in return King of Afghanistan, Amanullah was the first to formally recognize the Bolshevik government. Soviet Union had been a major power broker and an influential factor in Afghan politics, its hold ranging from civil-military infrastructure to society. Economic assistance to Afghanistan was provided by USSR from as early as 1929. In 1942, Soviet Union provided, to further strengthen the military forces of Afghanistan, small arms and aircrafts and established training centers in Tashkent, Soviet Uzbek.

Even with the end of British rule over India and formation of Pakistan, the western empire was still interested in the Soviet-Afghan relations and the territories of Central Asia. Meanwhile, since 1947, Afghanistan received economic aids, military

assistance, military hardware and other resourceful aids from USSR. The British Empire was determined to contain Soviet communist control over Afghanistan. However, relations between USSR and Afghanistan were far different from what the west wished for.

“PDPA and its association with USSR”

Nur Mohammad Taraki and Babrak Karmal established the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan in 1965. It was a Marxist-Leninist party, although the party refrained from branding itself in public as a “communist” party and instead used terms like “national Democratic” and “Socialist”. On 1st of January 1965, the party was officially formed at Unity Congress of the different sections of Socialist party of Afghanistan. At that time, the PDPA was known in Afghan society for having strong ties with Soviet Union. Taraki was invited to Moscow by international department of Communist Party of Social Union (CPSU).

In 1967, the political party was divided into several different sects, biggest being Khalqs and Parchams. The Khalqs were rigid Right Wing adhered to Marxist-Leninist Dogma led by Taraki. Parchams, on the contrary, were the leftist under the leadership of Karmal. However, major role in reconciliation of the two was played by Moscow. In March 1977, a formal agreement of unity among the two was achieved and a joint conclave was held between the two in July 1977. Since the partition of the party, both the sects had been in contact with the Soviet Union. Between the events, the party, in 1973, helped former Prime Minister of Afghanistan, Mohammad Daoud Khan to overthrow King Mohammad Zahir Shah and establish the Republic of Afghanistan. Earlier, PDPA was highly represented in the cabinet of Daoud Khan, but later on many officials were dismissed on account of increasing sourness between khan and PDPA.

Saur Revolution and Soviet involvement

Things turned worst for Afghanistan when a prominent member of PDPA from Parcham side was claimed to be assassinated by Khan. While the Government rejected all the rumors, members of PDPA were afraid that Khan planned to execute them all. Shortly after the funeral of the PDPA member, most leaders of PDPA were arrested by government, after a short protest. However, with military forces in favor of Khalqs, Hafizullah Amin was able to organize a coup.

The regime of Daoud Khan came to a violent end on the morning of 28th April 1978, when military forces from Kabul military base, loyal to Khalqs, stormed the Presidential Palace. Daoud and most of his family members were executed at Arg in capital city of Kabul. The coup marked the end of 152 years old Barakzai Dynasty in Afghanistan. Hafizullah Amin renamed the country as Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) and a civilian government was formed with Taraki (a Kalqi) as Prime minister, Karmal (a Parchami) as Deputy Prime minister and Amin as Foreign Minister. A treaty of friendship was signed between the USSR and the new established Democratic Republic of Afghanistan on 5th December 1978.

There were speculations of Soviet involvement in the coup, but no supporting evidence to prove so ever appeared. Daoud, who seemed to be committed to Non Alignment, became very uneasy with USSR's attempts to dictate Afghanistan's foreign policy. This led to deterioration of relations between the two countries. Thus, speculating soviet involvement in the coup was not very unbelievable. According to historian William Maley, Soviet may not be directly involved in the coup, but their rising tensions with Khan may possibly have refrained them from taking any action to prevent the coup. Even the state Department analyst told USA President Jimmy Carter that soviet involvement with the coup was very unlikely.

Post revolution government and unrest

The 18 months after the revolution, the newly established government acted in soviet-style and introduced modernizing reforms that were viewed un-Islamic by the conservatives. However, by June of 1978, rebellions broke out in various parts of Afghanistan and a civil war spread throughout the country. By September 1978, Hafizullah Amin seized the power, arrested and executed Taraki. According to the agreement of December 1978 between USSR and DRA, Afghanistan could call Soviet Union for military support. Following the Herat uprising in March 1979, Afghanistan contacted Chairman of USSR Council of Ministers to send "practical and technical assistance in form of men and armament". However, the response was not in favor of Afghanistan.

Alexei Kosygin, Chairman of Soviet Council of Minister, in response to Taraki's request replied, *"we believe it would be a fatal mistake to commit to ground troops... if our troops went in, the situation in your country would not improve. On the contrary, it would get worse. Our troops would have to struggle not only with an external aggressor, but with a significant part of your own people. And the people would never forget such things."* However, they continued to request for Soviet

troops to provide assistance in fight against the Mujahedeen. They repeated these requests and variations of these request quite until December 1979 and the USSR was in no rush to grant them. During the meetings held in March 1979, soviet promised to send military assistance and technical support but was opposed to direct intervention in internal matters of Afghanistan. However, condition began to further deteriorate during May – December 1979.

Deployment of Soviet troops and operation Storm-333

In October 1979, KGB, the intelligence agency of USSR, sent an undercover group of specialist to Afghanistan to understand the impact and reaction that could be received from afghan locals to deployment of soviet troops. They concluded that deployment of soviet troops would not be a wise decision. However, in Moscow, the three decision makers of Soviet Union, Foreign Minister, Defense Minister and the Chairman of KGB were hard pressed on about invasion in fall of 1979.

The primary reason for invasion was that, Amin, as a leader, was considered both, fanatic and incompetent to manage to situation in Afghanistan anymore. Initially, it was envisioned that, by a short intervention from Moscow, the leadership would be replaced from a radical Khalqi communist, Amin with a moderate Parchami communist, Babrak Karmal. The troika argued that if Islamic regime is established in Kabul, it would attempt to sponsor radical Islam in Soviet Central Asia. Given the reasons, Moscow decided to deploy military troops in Afghanistan with a short term vision of overturning the emerging radical Islamic rule with the moderate one, favorable to them.

On 25th December, the Defense Minister of Soviet union issued an order, stating that, "the state frontier of Democratic Republic of Afghanistan is to be crossed on ground and in air force by 40th army of soviet union on 25th December at 15:00 hours". This was the formal beginning of the invasion. On December 27, 1979, the soviet troops entered in Afghan uniforms, including KGB, Alpha group and Zenith Group, captured crucial Governmental, Military and media buildings in Kabul. The also had planned operation Storm-333, under which the Tajbeg Palace was targeted. Amin had shifted office of General Secretary to Tajbeg Palace believing the location to be more secure from any possible threat. As per their plans, on December 27, at 19:15 hours, the Tajbeg palace was attacked and General Secretary Hafizullah Amin was assassinated. The operation was successfully completed by the morning on December 28, 1979.

However, these were just the beginnings of the invasion. This was followed by a decade long intervention of USSR forces, political instability in the region, international criticism and ultimately the fall of Soviet union in 1990 and end of Cold War.

CONCLUSION

Due to its Geography, it played a crucial role in determining the political relations between the West and the USSR during Cold war era. The period saw the unseen developments in military, infrastructure, economy, international relations and modernized reforms. The end of Monarchy in Afghanistan and

rise of Soviet Communism in Afghan territories were some of the major development before the Soviet-Afghan war of 1979. Apart from early interests of European Empire, the United States of America was also concerned with growing influence of Soviet Russia in Afghanistan. It was speculated that the Islamic insurgency in Afghanistan was secretly supported by the USA, through Pakistan, to contain communist in Central Asia. USSR was alerted by the possibility of an Islamic state emerging in Afghanistan and the threat it could pose to the Soviet-based Central Asian region. Even though alerted against the military intervention in Afghanistan could bring reverse impact, Moscow decided that it was necessary to intervene and overthrow the “incompetent” (or not Soviet like communist) and establish a more “liberal” (or acceptable to soviet norms) rule in Afghanistan. However, the “short” intervention turned into a massive decade of disturbance.

The invasion on a practically defenseless country was viewed with horror and received international criticism. The UNGA passed a resolution against the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. According to political scientist Gilles Kepel, *“the Invasion was a fresh twist to the 19th century “Great Game” where Britain feared Russia to pose a threat to international Security.”* USA felt that inaction against USSR could encourage Moscow to go further ahead in its international ambitions.

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